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TO THE RESCUE



Carrying Mildred on his shoulders, Friar Tuck plunged into the moat.

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HOOD AND HIS MERRY MEN

CHAPTER 1.

A Defeat for the Normans.

THERE were signs of autumn in Sherwood Forest. Already some of the trees were tinted with red and gold; the bracken, now green and amber, hung its graceful fronds. At night the wind whistled ominously through the trees, while the dun-coloured clouds, scudding low on the horizon, told of gales and heavy rains to come, to be followed all too quickly by frost and snow.

It was Monday afternoon. A dreamy haze hung over the forest, and so gentle was the breeze that the hum of the bees drowned it.

Robin Hood and some of his merry men had dined under the great spreading oak-tree they loved so well. Others had satisfied their appetites near at hand, and there was but little talk among them, for it was a day of peace and the time to rest.

Maid Marian sang softly, and Robin Hood listened, with half-closed eyes, lulled to gentle slumber by the voice that always came sweetly to his ears.

Little John sat talking to Will Scarlet.

Ned Carter, Dick Driver, and Much the Miller's son strolled up and down, with their unstrung bows resting lightly on their shoulders.

Apart from the rest, and at a spot commanding a splendid view of a magnificent avenue of oaks

growing so regularly that they might have been planted by the hand of man, stood Friar Tuck, leaning on his quarter-staff.

The stillness increased as the sun hastened westward. The bumble-bees sailed to their solitary homes amid the roots of trees, where no foe could assail or storm affect them. And in sympathy with the quietude the foresters slept or talked in low whispers.

Suddenly Friar Tuck raised his head and held up his hand warningly. His practised ears had been the first to detect a low, rumbling sound in the far distance.

Little John, the great, burly giant, came to his side, and the good friar pointed in silence to the avenue along which they could see fully a mile.

"Listen!" he whispered at length. "Travellers are passing through the forest, and methinks they will come this way."

Little John put his hand to his ear, but not being satisfied stooped to the ground and listened.

"A yeoman's wagon drawn by a team of oxen, I should say," he remarked, looking up. "At all events, the strangers are not armed or mounted on war-horses, or I should hear the jingle of steel. Let us go forward, friar, and get a glance at them if we can."

"Although a man of peace, life in the forest has made me wary of traps set for the guileless and innocent," Friar Tuck replied. "I never see a load of

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wheat or straw but what I think that there may be Norman soldiers lying underneath. Still, if you promise to carry me out of danger when you run away, I'll go with you."

Little John knew very well that the friar was joking, but, nevertheless, he felt nettled.

"When you see me run away it will be clean out of the world," he retorted. "Forsooth, I make no boast, but I am as valiant as yourself."

"I, valiant?" cried Friar Tuck. "I, a man of peace, who tremble at every sound like a child in the dark? You know full well that I never strike only when hard-pressed, and e'en a coward will do that."

"Give me ten thousand such cowards as you," responded Little John, clapping him heartily on the shoulder, "and I will make a conquest of Christendom. But let us have done with this folly, and get ahead."

"The strangers have stopped," Friar Tuck said, craning his neck forward. "Methinks they have lost their way. Down—down! They are moving again. I can see them."

"Heavens! what eyes and ears you have for a man of your age!" Little John said under his breath as he crouched in the grass at the friar's side.

Into the avenue there came a heavy wagon with wooden wheels, such as the Saxons used. It was drawn by four lean, weary oxen, and at their head walked—or, rather, limped—a man, supporting his tired limbs with a goad, with which he now and then touched the cattle.

In the wagon was a woman hugging a baby to her breast, and at her side two little boys. Behind them the wagon was packed with bales and a few roughly constructed articles of furniture.

"Yonder come some poor wretches," Little John said. "What brings them to the forest, I wonder?"

"To see Robin Hood, I'll be bound," Friar Tuck replied. "Let us beckon them to come forward. Stay; I'd better go alone. If they see you, they will think that Goliath has come to life again and flee for their lives."

Little John grunted something under

his breath the reverse of complimentary to his companion.

"Get you gone, then," he said at length, "and bring the strangers along. If they have not come with some tale of woe, I'll swear that they stand in need of food and drink."

Friar Tuck rose slowly and advanced sedately until he was within hail of the man guiding the oxen.

"How now, good people," he cried. "Whither go ye? Advance, and have no fear of me, for I am a man of peace. But are you not afraid to come unarmed and unprotected to Robin Hood's domain?"

"Robin Hood I have come to see, and no other," the man replied. "If report speaks truly he is a redresser of evils and a terror to the unjust."

"Humph! that may be so," Friar Tuck replied, with a wistful glance at the wagon. "Whom have you there?"

"My wife and three of my children. The other is—— But let me hasten on. Guide me, father, to Robin Hood if you can, and Heaven will reward you."

"I guide you to an outlaw?" Friar Tuck rejoined. "Know you not that a price is set upon his head—upon the heads of all who enlist in his cause or give him shelter? Fie! fie! you may be a spy!"

"I am no spy," the man replied. "My name is Ethelbert Dale, and I seek Robin Hood because I have suffered a great wrong. Father, know you aught of the Baron Lachette of Derby town?"

"I have heard of him," Friar Tuck replied, making a wry face. "If you are a Saxon, as your name denotes, Baron Lachette bears you but little love."

"Love!" Dale echoed. "The monster has spared no pains to make me wretched. He has robbed me of my land, burnt the house in which I first saw the light of day; but, worse than all, he has robbed me of the flower of my flock—my innocent daughter Mildred, so named after her mother."

The woman uttered a wailing cry, and, drawing back the wrap from her head, revealed a still beautiful but painfully wan face.

"Say you so? Then hear me," the

friar exclaimed. "You shall see Robin Hood, and I trow that you shall not tell your story in vain. Ho, there! Arise, Little John, and unyoke the team. Good people, the hand of Heaven has guided you in the way of friends. I am Friar Tuck, a man of peace, of whom you have doubtless heard."

The Saxon dropped on his knees and, clasping his hands, bowed his head.

"Kneel not to me," Friar Tuck said. "I am but a poor instrument in the hands of Him who works His ways mysteriously, while we poor mortals wonder and doubt. The King of Sherwood Forest sleeps, but he will wake anon and give you and yours a hearty welcome."

Ethelbert Dale and his family trembled at the sight of Little John as he came striding along, but the kindly expression of his face, bearded though it was, soon reassured them.

Putting Dale gently aside, he unyoked the team of oxen, lifted the Saxon's wife and babe gently out of the wagon, and then, tacking the boys under his arms, marched stolidly away to where Robin Hood rested.

The King of Sherwood Forest was waking up, and, rubbing his eyes, looked in some astonishment at Little John and the burdens he bore.

"What kind of birds do you call these?" Robin demanded.

"Birds that have been turned out of their nest," Little John replied. "See! Friar Tuck is bringing the others along, and methinks they will tell you that which will give us work to do."

"That is welcome news," Robin Hood replied. "Time has hung rather heavily on our hands of late. It will not do for us to remain idle, lest, like steel that is laid aside, we become useless from rust."

"Of a truth," laughed Little John, "our friends, the Normans, have been most quiet."

"So is the air before the bursting of a storm," Robin Hood said. "But here comes the good friar and the folks you speak of. Sweet Marian, bid them welcome and bring them straightway to me. By the pity of Heaven, the story of no common sorrow is writ on these poor people's faces."

Ethelbert was so overcome with joy that tears flowed from his eyes, and his utterances were almost incoherent.

"Enough for the present," Robin Hood said kindly. "Sit, all of you, down in our midst, and you shall be cheered and made strong from our forest larder. Then I will listen to you, friend Dale, for I have sworn that no Saxon oppressed or in trouble shall appeal to me in vain."

Maid Marian summoned her lady attendants, and soon a white cloth was spread and covered with such dainties as made the guests stare.

"Waste no time, but eat and drink your fill," Robin Hood said. "Ho! there, Little John, see that the guard is changed, and bid them watch closely, for the wolf does not howl when coming to the fold."

After the meal Ethelbert Dale told the story of his wrongs, and Robin Hood listened to the end, without making any sort of comment. Then rising, his splendid eyes roved round the foresters.

"Little John," he said, "pick me out fifty men in such a manner that none shall say that they have been left behind unfairly."

Taking a scarf from Maid Marian's hands, the giant bound it over his eyes, and then began a curious game of hoodman blind; or, as it is better known in these days, blindman's-buff.

The foresters ranged themselves where they pleased, and stood silent and motionless, while the giant wandered about with outstretched hands. When a man was touched, or blundered against, he fell away from the rest and, walking up to Robin Hood, doffed his plumed hat.

"Forty-eight, babe of the forest," Robin Hood cried when at length that number had been chosen. "Only two more required."

Friar Tuck's face was a study just then. Little John had not even favoured him by knocking him off his legs, and his round face began to lengthen. Was he, the fighting monk, to be left out in the cold? Was he to take no part in rescuing Mildred Dale and teaching the much-hated Baron Lachette a lesson?

The rest of the foresters grew excited. All yearned to be numbered among the fifty; but their hearts knew of no envy towards each other, for they were a true brotherhood bound together in a common cause.

Meanwhile, Little John was blundering about, flourishing his arms. Once his brawny fist was within an ace of smiting Friar Tuck on the nose; but the monk neither flinched nor winked.

"Forty-nine!" cried Robin Hood as Will Scarlet received a smack on the cheek that made him stagger.

Friar Tuck was now in a state of mental agony. Only one chance remained, and if Little John missed him he would have to stay behind.

By this time the giant had had almost enough of stumbling about in the dark. He passed half a dozen men, turned to the left, then to the right, and then breaking into an elephantine trot cannoned against Friar Tuck and sent him flying like a shuttlecock.

The jolly monk laughed loudly as he picked himself up and, uttering a wild cry of exultation, twirled his quarter-staff over his head.

"Hark, how he crows!" said Little John, tearing the bandage from his eyes. "Faith, he may sing a different kind of song before he sees Sherwood Forest again!"

At that moment something came whizzing through the air, and a bolt from a crossbow just shaved Robin Hood's head and stuck quivering in the tree against which he was leaning.

"By Heaven!" he cried, clutching Dale fiercely by the arm; "if you have betrayed us, it were better that you never were born. I know how to punish as well as reward."

"I know nothing of this," Dale replied, gazing in amazement at the bolt. "I met no Normans, and as for betraying you——"

"Ware! 'Ware!" shouted Little John, ducking his head.

Half a dozen bolts came hissing along, and as they passed harmlessly over the foresters every man had strung his bow and slipped an arrow into the string.

Robin Hood's eyes gleamed and danced in his head. Nothing was dearer

to his heart than a fight with the much-hated Normans, and only a few moments sufficed to place his men in order.

Picking one of the bolts up, he looked at the shaft and smiled grimly.

"Just as I thought," he said. "Prince John has sent some more of his men to pay us his compliments. I hope he will be satisfied with the message they take back. Now, my merry men, drive these foxes out of cover first, and then we'll deal with the rest. Go back, Marian, sweetheart. Back, I say, or there will be sorrow enough to last me a lifetime."

He and Little John bounded along side by side, Friar Tuck following in their wake, gripping his quarter-staff viciously. The rest of the men spread themselves out and, taking advantage of the trees, advanced cautiously but swiftly.

It seemed that the Normans, attracted by Dale's wagon lumbering into the forest, had followed it, with the result that they came suddenly upon Robin Hood's camp and fondly believed that they had run him to earth at last.

Fully a hundred strong, and commanded by two fierce knights, the Normans were a formidable body to cope with; but had there been twice the number Robin Hood was not the man to turn his back upon them.

The crossbowmen comprising the advance guard of Prince John's troopers had crept up within a hundred yards of Robin Hood's favourite oak-tree, and had they been good shots some of the foresters must have fallen. But, like all pressed men, with no heart in the task set them, they were nervous, and thought more of their own safety than destroying the band.

Down amid the dying bracken and grass they crouched so low that neither Robin Hood nor his men could get a single shot at them. The mere fact of their lying so low, however, favoured the foresters, for the Normans' bolts when shot low got entangled in the undergrowth, and when discharged at an elevation they flew high over the heads of Robin Hood's men.

Not far away the Norman troopers waited in silence, with sword, lance, and axe ready to attack the outlaws.

If Robin Hood could be only drawn into the open, one thundering charge might prove sufficient to spread confusion among the dreaded freebooters, and a hot and merciless pursuit crush them for ever.

But the Normans were reckoning without their host. It is not easy to catch an old bird with chaff, and the King of Sherwood was by far too clever to walk into a trap with his eyes open.

The crossbowmen's bolts continued to hiss and whiz, but as yet not an arrow had been sent in response.

Calling Ned Carter and Dick Driver to his side, Robin Hood gave them certain orders, which they at once communicated to the foresters.

And now Little John clutched his ponderous axe with a terrible grip, Friar Tuck swung his quarter-staff as if getting ready to deliver a blow, and Robin Hood, slinging his bow over his shoulder, drew his sword.

The rest of the foresters halted, and, leaning upon their bows, waited in breathless anxiety.

Suddenly Robin Hood, regardless of the danger he was running, sprang forward like a stag scenting hounds in full chase; and Little John and Friar Tuck followed, roaring:

"No Normans! Liberty for the English! No Normans!"

Right into the line of the crossbowmen they crashed, and then the giant's axe, and Robin Hood's sword, and Friar Tuck's quarter-staff uprose, driving the hidden foe from their cover.

Half a dozen of the wretched hirelings kissed the dust, never to rise again, and as many fled, groaning with the pain of dreadful wounds.

And then the Norman troopers dashed on the scene, thinking the right moment had come for them to make their onslaught.

But Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck were prepared for this.

Swinging round, they took to their heels towards the place where they had camped, and the Norman troopers set up a shout of exultation when they saw the whole band of foresters also in retreat.

"They run! They run! Robin Hood

has turned coward! We have them now!"

"Forward!" yelled the knights, couching their lances. "Cut them down! Show them no mercy! Death to the outlaws!"

Urged on by spurs and savage cries, the horses plunged forward at a furious gallop. The earth trembled beneath the thunder of their hoofs, and the long straight blades and keen lance-points gleamed like lightning flashes amid the trees.

The two leaders were within twenty yards of Robin Hood and Little John when they suddenly faced round.

In a moment the Outlaw of Sherwood Forest had his bow ready and an arrow drawn to his shoulder, and in another one of the knights reeled and fell backwards, pierced through the brain.

The anguished man flung up his lance, and as it came rattling down Little John, bellowing like an angry bull, rushed headlong at the other knight.

Vain it was for the Norman to attempt to stop his heavily-armoured charger; nothing was left but to strike at the giant forester with the lance.

It missed him by the breadth of a hair, and then Little John's never-failing axe leapt up at his opponent, and the troopers were left without a commander.

It was done so quickly and so appallingly that their shouts of triumph changed to cries of dismay.

But on they came, unable to check their horses, and then they discovered the snare they had fallen into.

Round swung the foresters, down on one knee they went, their bows bent, and the barbed shafts flew, emptying saddle after saddle.

Men and horses rolled on the ground, others stumbled and sprawled headlong over them. Defeated the Normans knew they were, and since they gave no quarter they could expect none, and death stared them in the face.

Friar Tuck had been waiting and yearning for his chance, and now it came. Fat he was, and unwieldy he seemed to be; but appearances are often deceiving. It was a sight to see

him leap among the disorganised Normans, and it was music to the foresters' ears as they heard his seasoned quarter-staff of oak rattling on their steel-covered pates.

Such of the Normans as were within reach of the friar's hefty weapon dropped their swords and shielded their heads with their arms. A hurricane of thunderbolts seemed to have descended on them. Their snorting horses stampeded, and soon Robin Hood and his brave band were left complete masters of the field.

Robin Hood then shouted this order:

"Send out some of the men to bury the dead, and let others bring the wounded in. They will remember us, my merry men, and learn that our ways are not theirs. They shall take back the news that the outlaws of Sherwood do not harm defenceless men."

A few of the Normans escaped and roamed about disconsolately, fearing to return with the tidings of so disastrous a defeat; but that night the story was told in many a house in Nottingham, and many a Saxon slept happier that night, and prayed that Robin Hood, the King of Sherwood Forest, might be spared to protect and succour them.

CHAPTER 2.

Little John and Friar Tuck in Heanor Castle.

SLOWLY the drawbridge of Heanor Castle, near Derby town, descended, the great iron chains creaking and groaning as the great mass of woodwork slid into the grooved beams and were made fast.

A herald standing beneath the upraised portcullis sounded his trumpet and stood aside to allow Baron Lachette to ride past.

The baron was a man of about forty years of age, proud, haughty, and overbearing. His face was sinister in expression, but he was, nevertheless, handsome, and bore himself with dignity, coldly acknowledging the salutes of the herald and henchmen who formed themselves into a double line at his approach.

Baron Lachette had been hunting,

and wore armour of the lightest description. At a respectable distance came a number of keepers, leading the panting hounds, then some richly-attired young esquires, the pets of the household and marked for knighthood.

Two grooms ran to the head of the baron's beautiful, coal-black steed, no less proud and haughty than himself; and then Francis Lachette, lord and undisputed master of the thirty miles around him, dismounted and handed his embroidered gloves to a page, who received them upon bended knee.

The baron, having put aside his hunting costume for a robe of rich silk, passed up a lofty staircase and entered a long, gloomy corridor, with others diverging from it to different parts of the castle.

Here and there were suits of armour, mounted on pedestals, which had been worn in the time of William the Conqueror. Some of these suits were of great size, and had covered men of bulk and strength.

Passing two or three of the minor corridors, Baron Lachette stopped and, putting a small silver whistle to his lips, blew a soft call upon it.

It was answered by a peculiar shuffling sound, like some creature dragging its limbs painfully over the ground, and presently a strange and awful being in the form of a man appeared.

To unaccustomed eyes he might have been taken for an immense ape. His arms were abnormally long in contrast to his short, bandy legs. A huge head wobbled on his hunched shoulders, and his long, fiery-red beard, matted and twisted into all sorts of curious shapes, swept the ground.

The baron looked down with calm disgust on this ill-shapen human being as he grovelled on the oaken floor and then, clasping his hands, raised his gleaming eyes, set close together over a hawk-like nose.

"Quasamodo," said the baron, "have you obeyed my orders?"

"Ay, that have I, to the very letter; but though she took me for a demon she merely crossed herself and went on with her prayers."

Baron Lachette bit his under lip with vexation.

"And so you failed to terrify her?" he said.

"My lord, I confess it," Quasamodo replied. "No word could I make her speak, no cry of alarm could I extract from her lips. I told her that unless she consented to your advances she was to be given to me for wife."

"And then?"

"She only crossed herself again and continued praying."

"Drunken fool," cried the baron, spurning the hunchback, "was it for this I gave you shelter? I have seen you play such antics and utter such sounds as would make the hair of a stout-hearted man bristle. Did you try these tricks on her?"

"I tell you this, m'lord: I leaped and capered, flourished my arms above her, told her of tortures I had invented; told her that I was your familiar spirit, and that unless she consented right willingly to marry you I would drag her living to the tomb and give her the company of ghouls. But, by Pluto, nothing moved her. Her lips moved, truly, but not with the quivering of fear, and her eyes were always raised. She believes that Heaven will help her."

"Heaven!" Baron Lachette echoed. "The word comes strangely through such lips as yours."

"I am what I am," Quasamodo responded. "I owe no thanks to Heaven for sending me to the earth misshapen, ugly, and loathsome. You rescued me when the mob would have burnt me at the stake, and I am grateful. Command me! I am your dog—your slave."

"Give me the keys and follow me," Baron Lachette said.

Quasamodo plucked them from his girdle, but his hand trembled, and the keys fell jangling to the floor.

As if summoned by the sound, Father Anselm, the priest attached to the castle, appeared, his face pale with long fasting, looking livid in contrast with his black cassock.

"A word with you, baron," he said, fixing his steely eyes on the nobleman. "I have sought you everywhere this

morning, but had I known that you had gone a-hunting I might have saved myself the trouble."

"By the rood, it will not pain you to look for the man who keeps you so well," Baron Lachette replied, laughing. "Say on, but be brief. As for you, brute," he added to Quasamodo, "get you out of hearing. I will call you when I have need of your services."

Quasamodo slunk away to a niche in the wall and, curling himself up, lay muttering and growling like a surly dog.

"Baron," said Father Anselm, "you have reminded me of how much I owe you, but still I am mindful of the fact that the change from cloister to castle has not been all happiness. There are strange whispers in the air—reports I like not—and if they be true I must depart, leaving my debt of gratitude."

"You speak in riddles," the baron said fiercely.

"Then I will speak plainly," Father Anselm replied, drawing himself up. "My holy office forbids me to remain where iniquity and vice exist. It has come to my ears that a maiden, the daughter of a poor yeoman, has been brought here by force and is now in some secret part of the castle."

"Let it come to your ears, then, that he who interferes with my actions incurs my anger," the baron returned.

"Have you no fear of the wrath of Heaven?" demanded the priest.

"Pshaw!" Baron Lachette sneered. "It is the custom of a nobleman to employ a priest, and that priest is a servant dependent on the bounty of his lord and master. Let that answer suffice you."

"All men are servants, serving one Master, but I am none of yours," Father Anselm rejoined, with dignity. "I return to-night to the abbey. I wash my hands of you and this place."

Baron Lachette clapped his hand to his sword and half-drew it, but thrust it back to its sheath.

"Your cloth saves you," he said, with a contemptuous gesture. "Had any other man used such words to me I would have struck him dead at my feet and sent his body to the forest for the

ravens to peck at. Get you back to your cloister, and to your mumbling prayers and droning chants. I, Baron Lachette, know how to deal with meddling priests, though they come by the hundred. Out of my path, and keep beyond my reach, or I may repent that I did not dull the blade of my sword. Quasamodo, follow me."

"Beware!" cried Father Anselm. "Beware, ere it be too late!"

The baron strode away, snapping his fingers, and Quasamodo waddled after him, for all the world like a great swelling toad.

"As a man lives, so shall he die," Father Anselm said sadly. "By the sword has the baron lived, and a violent death he shall die. And now I must away to tell my tale to the good abbot. We shall see if the proud nobleman will defy him when threatened with excommunication."

The poor priest's worldly belongings were but few, and such as he could carry without tiring his hands. He uttered no complaint, and said no word of farewell to the retainers who had at all times sought his advice and poured their woes into his ears. Passing out of the castle, he wended his way slowly and thoughtfully until, passing through the beautiful meadows, he reached a wood through which ran a straight, broad path.

Father Anselm was angry as well as sad. Richard, the Lion-hearted King, was in the Holy Land, fighting the Saracens, and Prince John, acting as Regent in his absence, was doing everything in his power to find favour with the nobility, lavishing gifts and honours upon them, and sneering at every complaint made against them.

Father Anselm pitied the poor, but had little power to help them. Many of the abbots and monks were of Norman blood, and a Norman prelate ruled supreme. Thus small wonder that the sympathies of the priests were biased and one-sided.

On entering the wood, Father Anselm heard a sound which there was no mistaking. Someone was snoring with all the energy that his lungs and nasal organ could put into it.

Under a tree lay a monk, short of stature and almost as round as he was long, fast asleep. At his side was a leather bottle quite empty.

Not far away, with his face buried in his arms, a man of tremendous proportions reclined, also oblivious to everything around him. His attire was ragged and dusty, his shoes down at the heels, and a tuft of hair protruded through his well-worn cap.

How a monk and the gigantic vagrant came to be in company was a puzzle to Father Anselm; yet it seemed certain to him that they had shared the contents of the ample wine-bottle, and having emptied it had fallen asleep.

The giant carried in his belt, as was usual with all men, a long knife, while under the monk's neck was a long, stout staff.

"These are strange companions," said Father Anselm. "Poverty may lead to excesses when temptation falls in its way, but when it comes to one wearing the garb of the Holy Church——"

The prostrate monk opened his eyes, stopped snoring, and sneezed.

"Who speaks?" he demanded, half-rising and supporting himself on his elbow.

"Brother," said Father Anselm, "this is not well."

"Truly it is not," replied Friar Tuck, the monk. "The bottle is empty, and I know not where to replenish it. Yonder chicken—poor belated traveller—is in a worse strait than myself, for he has a body that requires the nourishment of three such punies as I."

At this moment Little John rolled over and, opening his cavernous mouth, yawned like a lion.

"Oh, for a slice from the haunch of a good fat buck," he said. "I trow it would go down well without salt or bread. Thanks, monk, for having pity on a thirsty soul, and—but whom have we here?"

"A father who would rebuke us for loving the good things of this life."

"Nay, for abusing them," put in Father Anselm.

"Come, come," said Friar Tuck, "be just in your judgment. I am but a poor monk begging my way from door

to door, while this man has walked many a league in search of employment. A man we passed told us that there is always hospitality to be found at yonder castle."

"Hospitality of a kind, yes," Father Anselm replied. "I have just come from Heanor Castle, and the place so little appeals to me that I have turned my back upon its walls for ever."

Friar Tuck rolled up his eyes and indulged in a groan of disappointment, while Little John, rising, shook himself and extended his immense arms.

"Perchance," said Friar Tuck, "there may be a place for a man of my calling since you have left."

"I should say that Baron Lachette will find in you a man after his own heart," Father Anselm sneered as he glanced at the empty wine-bottle.

"And I," quoth Little John, "will offer my services as a man-at-arms."

"The baron will give you good wages and keep you well if you do his bidding," replied Father Anselm, still sneering. "He is not particular."

"Then we shall be in luck," Friar Tuck said. "Thanks, brother, for the information you have imparted. Stay! do not move away yet. You have sat in judgment upon us because you found us asleep and apparently overcome with wine. Wait and reserve your condemnation of us. And now let me tell you this: I have known a Norman priest who, while shrinking in horror at the thought of a bottle of wine or a hearty meal, could look calmly on while the house of a Saxon was burning and his children being slaughtered by ruffians. Good-day to you, brother; good-day."

"In me you see no such priest," Father Anselm retorted.

"I am glad to hear it," Friar Tuck replied calmly. "The good man who taught me to read often said that there was no rule without an exception. Peace go with you. Come, my big brother with the limbs of iron, we will go to the castle and judge for ourselves."

No sooner was Father Anselm out of sight and hearing than Friar Tuck gripped Little John's arm and smiled all over his broad, jovial face.

"Nothing could be better," he said. "It will be easy to throw dust in Baron Lachette's eyes now. Come on; I long to be beyond the walls. Go you first and play well your part. That you will succeed I doubt not, for of a certainty the baron loves fighting better than saying his prayers."

"He shall have plenty of the first, and just as much of the other as Robin Hood will allow him," Little John responded, striding forward. "Keep back! Yonder sentinel has keen eyes, and is watching us closely. Pretend to give me a groat from your wallet, and then set about counting your beads as though you had forgotten them for a month."

On reaching the outer gate, beyond which was the moat, Little John was challenged by a man who thrust a pike within an inch of his breast.

"Not so fast," growled the man. "This is not the way to the retainers' hall, nor has the hour come for vagabonds to be fed."

"Vagabond in your teeth!" Little John growled. "A man may wear rags and yet be as honest as he who wears silk and ermine. I am a soldier of fortune, and I fight for him who pays best."

As he spoke Little John twisted the pike out of the man's hands as if it had been a straw and tossed it over his head.

"Now," he said, "unless you want to follow that shaving of wood and steel you will send word to Baron Lachette that there is a man at his gates who can fight, and not play at it."

The astounded sentinel uttered a sharp cry, and several others came up, making a great clatter with their weapons.

Little John folded his arms and stood his ground, unmoved, but ready to leap upon the men and scatter them like chaff if they attempted to molest him.

In the meantime Friar Tuck was advancing step by step, and so intent on his beads that he was apparently totally unconscious of what was happening.

The men-at-arms were regarding Little John with feelings of mingled rage and alarm when the captain of the

guard, hearing the commotion, came to the gate.

"What is all this?" he demanded fiercely.

"I presented myself civilly enough, seeking the baron, to know if he has work for such a man as I," Little John said. "This whipper-snapper gave me too much of his tongue, so I let it wag on, but thought it best to deprive him of his weapon that stings. Here I am, a hearty man, and come to fight if needs be."

This was true enough, but the captain of the guard misconstrued the giant's meaning entirely.

"Let him enter," he said, "and the baron shall see him at his leisure. To what shire do you belong?"

"The shire of Nottingham."

"Then surely you must be Little John?"

The giant threw back his head and laughed.

"If I were Little John," he said, "should I be clad in rags and in want of a meal? Yet they say that my eyes are on a level with his."

"Get you to the strangers' hall and eat your fill," said the captain of the guard after pausing a moment. "I doubt not but that the baron will find you some kind of employment, and put you in the van when lusty blows be needed. How now, monk? What brings you here?"

"The hope of charity," Friar Tuck responded, holding out his hand. "Give me food or money, I care not which. I am a poor wandering frair, without home or hermitage."

"Kicked out of some monastery most likely," said the captain, laughing. "By Peter and Paul! it is no wonder, for you must have caused a famine there by your great appetite. I trow that you believe not in starving the flesh for the good of the soul."

"Truly, my ways are not quite the ways of the abbot," Friar Tuck replied, winking his left eye; "and it is just as true that I did not wait to give a lengthy explanation how it came about that certain wine-bottles were found in my cell. An enemy must have put them there."

"Get you within, you rogue with a shaven crown," the captain cried. "The baron will find more sport in you than in his jester, whose jokes are rusty and creak like an unoiled hinge."

"May I be forgiven for the lies I have been guilty of," Friar Tuck thought as he skipped nimbly through the open gate. "But they were told for a good cause, and the recording angel will wipe them out. Never was such luck! For three days Little John and I have been planning how to get even beyond the outer walls, and here we are in the very castle itself."

The visitors were received in the strangers' hall none too graciously, but with respect—Friar Tuck on account of his calling, and Little John because of his immense size.

Six men were endeavouring to move a huge table, and were cursing roundly at its extreme heaviness, when Little John, taking one end in his hand, dragged it across the hall and placed it where a retainer in splendid livery was directing.

Not only did he move the table; but the half-dozen men, too, who fell sprawling about in all directions. On regaining their feet they scampered out of his way in affright.

"Don't mind me," Little John said, drawing a stool to the table and testing it before venturing to sit down. "I am only a baby, the youngest of ten, and just a weakling. My eldest brother, known as Edwy the Strong, could carry me about on the end of his thumb."

"How we shall suffer one day for these falsehoods!" Friar Tuck groaned. "But go on, Little John; you have taken the matter out of my hands, so make an end of it."

"He carries his house on his back wherever he goes," Little John continued, "and, mark this: once the parish priest offended him, but Edwy the Strong had his revenge. He stole the church tower and threw it into the river."

"My bulky friend," said Friar Tuck, his eyes goggling and his cheeks expanded with suppressed laughter, "have done telling us about your brother, and let us eat and drink."

Nervously enough, two of the attendants set a joint of beef on the table, and Little John, having helped the friar, cut himself such an enormous slice that they gasped and turned pale.

"No wine for me," Little John cried as a bottle was placed on the table. "Bring me ale—good, sound ale. In a horn of malt and hops there are life and strength. Ale—a flagon of ale—and see that it is level with the rim."

Other servants stole in to see the giant eat and drink, and now and then cast a glance at the wandering monk, who, considering that he was a man of peace and should be used to long fasting, did wonderful justice to the good things provided.

At length both were satisfied, and Friar Tuck fell sound asleep where he sat; but Little John, following a man who beckoned to him, went into another apartment and there strode up and down, awaiting the summons to be ushered into the presence of Baron Lachette.

CHAPTER 3.

A Beautiful Captive.

It is time that we followed the baron and Quasamodo.

On reaching the end of the corridor Baron Lachette stopped before a trophy of arms arranged in the wall.

It consisted of a shield, with a spiked boss in the centre, backed with swords and spears, and surmounted by an axe that had done duty at the battle of Hastings.

Giving the boss of the shield a sudden twist, the trophy swung on one side, bringing with it a heavy oak panel.

Beyond lay a narrow passage, dimly lit by a solitary lamp. Baron Lachette and Quasamodo entered, a flagstone tilted under their feet, and the panel closed without noise.

At the end of the passage, which inclined towards the lower part of the castle, was a square space. In one corner was a piece of machinery, consisting of a lever and an arrangement of cog-wheels beneath. Above the lever a steel crank rod ran along the wall and passed through the top of a ponderous door.

Selecting a key from the bunch, Baron Lachette went to the door and, placing his ear against it, listened.

"She sleeps," he whispered, turning to Quasamodo.

"She is always quiet," the hideous dwarf replied. "She makes no audible complaint, and does not even ask for food. If it were not set before her, she would starve and die without murmur."

The baron made an impatient gesture, and thrusting the key into the lock he wrenched it round with all his strength. The door swung inwards and struck the wall with a dull thudding sound, and the baron, thrusting Quasamodo on one side, passed into a groined-roof apartment, which could either be used as a dungeon or hiding-place.

It was furnished comfortably with a couch, chairs, and a table, and the floor was covered with the skins of animals and thick rugs, instead of rushes, so much in vogue at the time.

There was no window or loophole to admit the light of day, but a lamp swinging from the ceiling gave ample light. It shone upon the form of a humbly-clad but beautiful girl about eighteen years of age. Her simple gown of homespun was the work of her own tapering fingers, and its only ornament was a girdle of finely woven steel wire.

The girl's long golden hair fell in shimmering masses over her shoulders almost to her feet, and though captivity had left its mark on her features the bloom of the rose was still on her cheeks.

"Mildred," Baron Lachette said, "I am here again to tell you how I love you."

Mildred Dale's deep blue eyes roved towards him, and her lips curled with scorn.

"Love!" she echoed. "You talk of love to me! You who have so deeply wronged me, and all whom I hold dear. Love! Was it the love of an honest man that brought me here? Was it the love of an honest man that sent a beast in human form to affright me with his uncouth shape and fiendish antics? If you love me, give me my freedom. Repent of your wicked act and let me go."

"Your grace is mistaken," the man replied. "I came forward in my usual manner, but noticed that you appeared to be lost in meditation."

"Well," said the baron, "what brings you here?"

"I have sought you to tell of strangers now within the castle. One is a giant, a soldier of fortune, who is willing to bear arms if you will employ him. The other is a wandering friar, who, by the rood! seems a better judge of good food and drink than of his beads."

"A giant and a friar, say you?" Baron Lachette remarked thoughtfully. "Both may prove useful. I will see them at once. Stay! just a moment, Lantenent. Heard you a sound just now?"

"A sudden storm of wind arose," Lantenent the steward replied, "and one of the postern doors banged to so violently as to break its hinges."

"And that was sufficient to make me craven-hearted," the baron muttered through his set teeth. "Oh, coward! Oh, wretched fool!"

Then, bursting out laughing, he added:

"Bring some wine to my chamber, and then I will see these strangers; the giant first, and the food-loving friar afterwards."

CHAPTER 4.

The Baron's New Servants.

LACHETTE had scarcely emptied a goblet and thrown himself into an easy attitude when Little John appeared before him.

"A second Goliath!" exclaimed the baron. "A Hercules among pigmies! So, fellow, you would enter my service?"

"Such is my desire," Little John replied. "Board me well, and I promise not to disgrace the fare your castle provides. Money I hold in little value, so if you will give me a noble for every fight I engage in I shall be satisfied."

"You are the man for me," Baron Lachette replied. "Go to my tailor and armourer, and tell them to equip you with livery and harness fit for your broad back. By the giants of old! I'll fear but little while you are at my

side. Go, and return to me when my steward bids you come. And now for the friar."

Friar Tuck was already looking in at the door; and paying no heed whatever to Little John he advanced and, clasping his hands on his breast, looked humbly at the baron.

"By the bones of the Conqueror!" said Baron Lachette, "judging by your frame you have not begged in vain. What name are you known by?"

"I call myself Father Paul."

"And a merry rogue you are, if I may judge by your face and the twinkle of your eyes," the baron said, laughing. "Come, be honest with me. You feel more at ease in a larder than in a church?"

"Alas!" Friar Tuck replied, "a strong liking for good living is one of my weaknesses. You ask me to be honest with you, and I will. I took a fee to attend a secret marriage. The abbot found it out, and sent me to the roof of the church, there to fast for a week as a penance for my sins; but, liking solid earth under my feet, and a good, sound meal better than bread and water, I bade adieu to the brotherhood and came away."

"Ran away, you mean, rascal."

"What matters how a man uses his legs when he is in a hurry?" Friar Tuck replied. "Baron, I thank you for your hospitality, and only crave lodging for the night."

"Stay!" the baron replied. "I may have work suited to you. I have just sent a puny, white-livered priest, pack and baggage, from my castle, and you might——"

"Oh, baron," Friar Tuck interrupted, "I pray you do not raise my hopes only to cast them down. May I—can I hope that I shall take the priest's place?"

Baron Lachette hesitated. Mildred's form arose before his eyes. How beautiful she was! How young, tender, and lovely! He had acted like a mad fool to bid Quasamodo kill her. Here was a priest ready to mumble over the marriage service, and to read lectures by the yard to the object of his passion.

"Yes," he said at length, "perchance I may so employ you. Come to me in

the morning, and I will lay my heart open to you. If you are a wise man, you will be discreet and secret, for if you attempt to betray me, or divulge one word that passes from my lips, I'll have you flayed alive."

"Rest assured that I will be as secret as though I were born deaf and dumb," replied Friar Tuck, overjoyed at his success.

"Go, then. Drink well, sleep well; but, asleep or awake, be silent. When you attend me, see that your brain is not addled, and that you make no muddle of the task I set you, or I'll send for the giant you saw pass out just now and bid him start you on a journey from the top of the castle-keep."

Friar Tuck pretended to look terribly frightened, and he choked back a groan as he wheeled slowly round and took his departure.

When it was known that Little John had been retained, the henchmen, mere pigmies compared with his great bulk, followed him about in awe-stricken silence.

One of the towers was undergoing some repairs, and the giant, climbing the staircase, scarcely wide enough for him to pass without rubbing his shoulders against the walls, stood watching the workmen struggling with a huge mass of stone, which they were endeavouring to dislodge.

In spite of the lever they were using, the stone defied all efforts. The cement cracked and crumbled, but the stone held fast.

Suddenly Little John took the lever from the men, drove it deeper into the space already made, and with a single twist of his iron wrists lifted the stone clean out of its place. Then, raising it to his shoulder, he calmly said:

"Where shall I put this?"

The men fell back in alarm before him, and two or three made a dash towards the staircase.

Laughing, Little John walked to the edge of the tower, and, with the stone still resting on his shoulder, looked over.

"There would not be much left of the man I dropped it on," he said. "I see you've got a crane fixed to lower this rubbish to the earth, but I will show you

an easier way to do it. Stand clear there!" he added, in a voice of thunder.

The stone, weighing fully five hundredweight, went hurtling through the air, and just as it reached the earth Friar Tuck crawled from a postern.

The mass of stone missed him by an ace, and so covered him with dust and earth as to render him invisible for some moments.

"Heaven help me!" Little John cried, in an agony of fear. "I have killed one of the best men that ever trod Sherwood Forest. But, no; he lives! Good luck, he lives!"

"If that was thrown at me," Friar Tuck bellowed as he picked himself up, "it was a good shot. Bull on two legs, if you would kill me, give me a chance of defending myself."

"I'll throw no more pebbles to-day," Little John said, wiping the perspiration from his face. "'Fore Heaven, I thought it had cracked his shaven crown!"

The man superintending the repairs stepped forward and, looking sternly at Little John, said:

"What is that I heard about Sherwood Forest? Methinks that you know more about this wandering friar than you care to tell."

"I know this," Little John retorted, "if you try to browbeat me, I will send you down in one jump to question the friar yourself. I am a soldier of fortune, a free-lance, and I will have no interference from such a whipper-snapper as you."

The man fell back in alarm, but Little John's words were not lost on him.

"This to the baron," he muttered in his beard. "These men have come to the castle for no good purpose. I'll watch this blustering giant closely, and put a bolt through his head if I catch him at treachery."

Little John strolled round the top of the tower. He noticed that a great brazier, filled with sticks dipped in pitch and ready to serve as a beacon, was fixed in the middle, and that a great iron trap-door lay near the stair-head, ready to be pulled over at a moment's notice. But he made no

comment, and walking again to the edge watched Friar Tuck, who was wandering apparently aimlessly about, counting his beads, but in reality making mental notes of everything he saw.

CHAPTER 5.

What Happened on the Castle Roof.

EVENING came in Heanor Castle, and the huge banqueting hall was ablaze with light.

Baron Lachette sat alone at the head of the great table, his wants being attended to by his cup-bearer and a server, who sliced off the best parts of the viands and praised their quality. His jester, an old, wrinkled man, came out with his best quips and cranks; but he could not bring a smile to his master's face.

The baron was moody and silent, and sat watching with eyes of suspicion the men sitting below the salt.

There were no noble guests at the castle, and when the minstrels came in all rose and, passing before their great master, bowed humbly and went out, leaving the baron with his cup-bearer, to be soothed into slumber by the minstrels' music.

Friar Tuck went to the cell recently occupied by Father Anselm, but did not remain there long.

One by one the retainers sought their beds of rushes, the voices of the minstrels ceased, the sentinels for the night began their dreary rounds, and soon the castle was wrapped in darkness and slumber.

A bell tolled the hour of midnight.

The sound was still booming through the castle when Friar Tuck, emerging from a corridor, began climbing the stairs leading to the top of the keep. He had been so cautious as to remove his sandals, and made no more noise during his ascent than a flitting shadow.

The darkness was so dense that he could not see a step in advance, and he was often in such danger of stumbling that he stopped and, stooping, tested the stairs with his hands before trusting to his feet.

At length a star peeped wistfully at

him, and the friar knew that his journey was almost at an end.

It was a mere glimmer of light that shone down upon him, but never was light more welcome. It was his guide, and a faithful one, and the friar gave a sigh of relief, for he had begun to think that the winding staircase was without end, and that he would never reach the top.

The space between him and the walls now widened, and at length he stopped and uttered a peculiar cry like some night-bird on the wing.

It was answered immediately, and the head of Little John appeared. Then the giant's long arm shot forth and, catching Friar Tuck under his right armpit, lifted him bodily to the lead-covered roof.

"Oh, my bones and body! Was there ever such a-getting upstairs?" the friar groaned. "I pray you let me sit down awhile and regain my breath."

"It would take more work than you have done, friar, to make you so tired," Little John replied. "Now, have you seen or heard aught of the girl?"

"Can I see through stone walls?" the friar answered. "And have I yet had time to find out secret places? No! As to hearing anything, the baron's varlets are as quiet as the oysters on our shores."

"Well, I promised Robin Hood a signal to-night if we gained access to the castle; and now that he knows we have he is anxiously awaiting it. How can it be done? And, when done, how to get the answer?"

"Two heads are better than one. Come, let us think," Friar Tuck replied.

There was a short pause; then the friar said:

"Listen! Beneath my cassock I wear a white garment, and if that could be hoisted it might be seen by our chief."

"Off with your cassock, then, but lie low while you pull off your shirt," said Little John. "I will stand before you and shield you from the wind."

"By St. Giles! it is a chilly night to do such a thing. Duty is duty, but I pray you move not until I have covered my shivering limbs again with my cassock."

"Be quick about it," Little John answered. "You have fat enough on your bones to melt ice. Here is a staff, and we'll fly a rare flag."

Friar Tuck lost no time, but just as he was pulling his cassock over his head something that looked like a lame animal darted from a deep shadow, and a gleam of steel flashed in the pale moonlight.

Little John's quick eyes detected it. His right foot shot out, and Quasamodo rolled like a ball from one side of the leaden roof to the other.

"Ho, there! a rat—a rat!" hissed the giant, pouncing on the hunchback and clapping a hand over his mouth.

Friar Tuck was now in a state of confusion. His rather tightly-fitting cassock clung to his portly form, and for the life of him he could not get his arms out.

"Fore Heaven! was a man of peace ever in such a fix?" he gasped. "How easy it would be to skewer me with a dagger now!"

In the meantime Little John had discovered that he had caught a Tartar. Quasamodo was possessed of immense strength, and had learned to wriggle like an eel.

Bare to his loins, he had oiled himself all over, and Little John, although contriving to keep his hand over the hunchback's mouth and thus stifle his cries, found it difficult to hold him.

So the struggle went on, while Friar Tuck rolled hither and thither wrestling with his obstinate garment.

At length Quasamodo slipped away and, leaping backwards, picked up the dagger that had fallen from his hand and stood at bay. He had no breath to spare, and only a hideous, gurgling sound came from his throat as he crouched like a tiger about to spring.

Little John dared not turn his head to see how Friar Tuck was getting on, but by certain words that came to his ears he concluded that the monk was still in difficulties and staggering blindly about in the dark.

"Keep still! Beware of the stair-head," he said, not daring to shout lest the sentinels below should hear. "I will come to your aid presently."

"If you don't come quickly I shall choke!" Friar Tuck gasped. "This wretched cassock is twisted into a dozen knots. What have you there? A man or a snarling wild-cat?"

"Neither one nor the other, but a part of both, I am ready to swear," Little John replied. "Come, brute, let me get my arms round you again."

Quasamodo, making a loud, hissing sound, sprang, and Little John met him with a blow of his fist.

Struck clean between his gleaming eyes, the hunchback threw his long, hairy arms above his head and fell unconscious, for all the world like a crushed toad.

Little John then rushed to his friend's assistance, and in less than a minute the strange signal was flying, while Friar Tuck, having slipped on his cassock, continued his lamentations.

Suddenly something came whizzing through the air. It was an arrow, and so truly timed and aimed that it impaled the friar's shirt and hung down.

A piece of linen was rolled near the barb, and Little John knew that it contained some message. But what it was there was no light to see, and, hauling down the "signal-flag," he pointed to the stairhead and bade Friar Tuck descend.

"What of him?" the friar demanded, glancing in disgust at the motionless form of Quasamodo.

"But for the noise his body would make, I would pitch him over," Little John replied. "I'll bring him with me, although the thought of touching him makes me feel sick."

"It is not a man, but a monster," the friar said. "Stay yet a moment. There is something more than his dagger-sheath in his girdle."

"Keys," quoth Little John, pouncing on them. "The wretch is warder of some part of the castle."

Friar Tuck began to descend the stairs, and Little John, handling Quasamodo as gingerly as if he were a bundle of dirty rags, followed.

They had not gone far when a voice shouted:

"Who goes there? Speak, or my crossbow shall find an answer for you."

Friar Tuck sat down and thrust his head between his knees, while Little John, dropping Quasamodo, stepped over the friar and leaped blindly.

In his descent he overturned a man, who fell with a clatter and, dashing his head against the wall, lay still.

How the giant reached the landing below without breaking his neck he never knew. It seemed to him that he came in contact with nothing but the man until the masonry stopped him with such a blow that for some few moments the air was streaked with jagged flashes of light.

"Hist!" he called softly, wiping the blood from his face. "All's well. The crossbowman will not trouble us more. If I am any judge of skulls, his is so cracked that he will never find use for it again. Keep still, and wait until I come up. Heavens! if I had hit the wall but a little harder, I should have gone clean through it."

"What a fearful night for a man of peace!" Friar Tuck groaned. "Come up quickly, little one, or I shall die of horror. Give me my quarter-staff, and I'll not turn the back of my girdle to a dozen men; but this smashing and crashing in the dark drives me mad."

The friar was really upset and sick at heart. Near him lay the loathsome form of Quasamodo, and below was the dead sentinel.

"There is some good in all misfortunes," Little John said as he sat down at the friar's side. "Be a man," he whispered encouragingly.

"By my faith, such things as these tell me that I am a man," Friar Tuck replied. "Let us go."

"Ay, and we will hoodwink the baron, too," Little John said.

Reaching out his hand, the giant felt Quasamodo's heart.

"He is as dead as the other," he said. "We will place them side by side, and when they are found it will go forth that they engaged in a mortal struggle, resulting in death to both."

"I care not what is said, nor what is done, so long as I get out of this pitchy blackness," Friar Tuck replied. "Give me some kind of light, and I will fight to the bitter end, but here I seem to

be in a tomb, with evil spirits around me."

"That is scarcely a kind thing to say in my presence," Little John grunted. "One moment, and I will carry you down on my back."

A few moments sufficed to place the dead men in such a position as to make them look as if they had been fighting, and then Little John, hoisting the friar on his shoulder, carried him safely down to the corridor.

It was the very one which the baron and Quasamodo had traversed that day, and the lamp was still burning dimly.

"Now let us see what Robin Hood has to say," Little John said. "Here, friar, you are a scholar, so read. My ears burn to drink in the words."

"It says that he is fully prepared to take the castle either by strategy or assault," Friar Tuck replied. "He wishes us well, bids us be cautious, and promises us rich rewards for our services."

"My richest reward will be to discover the poor girl captive," Little John replied. "But where is she? Where has the baron hidden her?"

"Come to my cell—no one durst enter there—and we will talk the matter over."

CHAPTER 6.

The Rescue of Mildred Dale.

THE friar's cell was a small apartment, scarcely twelve feet square. It was fitted up in accordance with the hard style in which the priest of even a luxurious household then lived. The floor was bare, as also were the walls, and the bed in the corner was hard and uninviting.

A small, barred loophole near the ceiling admitted light and air, but gave no view of the landscape.

Two thick wax candles burned at the foot of a shrine, and having closed the door and secured it against intrusion Friar Tuck trimmed the wicks with his fingers.

"I am somewhat myself again," he said as Little John leaned his back against the door, with his ear so inclined that he could hear the slightest sound outside. "Now listen, and twit

me not about my weakness. That is gone. I came to fight with men, not with creatures from Hades. But I am strong again, and——"

"Have done, and tell me what I am to listen to," Little John interrupted.

"I told you that I had seen and heard nothing to lead to the discovery of the Saxon girl," Friar Tuck said. "But your adventure with the hunchback has set me thinking. This afternoon, while I was walking in the castle grounds, I saw the misshapen wretch creeping under the shadow of a buttressed wall. He was carrying something, but what it was I could not see, as it was wrapped in a piece of coarse linen. I paid no heed to him, thinking that he was fulfilling some mission, yet it puzzled me that he should vanish."

"Vanish?"

"Yes, vanish, and almost under my very eyes," Friar Tuck replied. "Where he went to I could not see, so I questioned a man, who, laughing, said: 'Oh, that is Quasamodo, the dwarf. The baron saved him from being stoned to death by a mob. He is the baron's slave, and wanders about the castle at will, and climbs in and out like an ape where men would fear to go with a ladder.'"

"Humph! There may be more in this than met your eye," Little John said. "We must see where Quasamodo disappeared, and find whether there is a loophole near."

"There is no loophole," Friar Tuck replied, "and that is the mystery of it."

"Then there must be some secret way through the wall, known only to the baron and Quasamodo when he was alive," Little John said. "At dawn the sentinels will be removed, and we will set to work to unravel this mystery."

The two sat talking until a band of rosy light shot athwart the east and, expanding rapidly, rolled back the dark curtain of night and cleared the sky for the sun.

But ere the first golden flush leaped up Friar Tuck and Little John were creeping stealthily round the castle walls.

There were no prying eyes to watch

them. The weary sentinels had gone to their beds, and the only watcher sat in the lodge of the keep, leaning drowsily on the handle of his sword, and wishing that the hour to break his fast had come.

The walls were composed of great slabs of stone, supported by brick buttresses quite ten feet thick at the base.

There was, as Friar Tuck said, no loophole in that wing of the castle. The wall rose fully forty feet, and was impregnable against attack.

Little John stood still and ran his fingers through his wiry hair. He was completely nonplussed. There was nothing on the ground to indicate a way to a subterranean passage, and it seemed out of all question that a man could find the means of entering through the wall.

Friar Tuck did not remain idle, but paced up and down, testing the stone slabs with his hands.

Stopping suddenly, he cried out:

"Come this way, baby."

Little John went quickly to his side.

"Strike your knuckles on this spot," said the friar.

The giant did so, and was rewarded with a hollow sound.

"As I live, a piece of wood painted the colour of stone," he said. "Keep watch, good friar. We have made a discovery, and all that is now wanted is to find how the hunchback entered. There is no sign of a keyhole, or—— But wait; what is this?"

A small indentation in a corner of the block attracted Little John's attention, and he pressed his thumb upon it.

The mass of wood tilted backwards, revealing a broad passage festooned with cobwebs.

Little John was for dashing in at once, but Friar Tuck restrained him.

"We have found the secret of entering," he said; "but another puzzle remains. How are we to get out?"

"That we must chance," replied Little John, who was all impatience. "Follow me and fear not. It will go hard with any men who attempt to stop me now."

He raised the great block of wood, and as he pressed it into its place he heard a sharp, clicking sound.

"The spring is somewhere here, and we shall be able to find it without much difficulty," he said.

The giant led the way, and had not taken many paces before something struck his foot.

"An iron bar," he said, picking it up. "This will come in very useful. Now, friar, hold my belt and keep your hand upon it."

For fully fifty yards they groped their way in darkness so dense that they seemed to feel it. Then a current of fresher air fell upon Little John's face, and he knew that the passage was coming to an end. Presently he and the friar entered the space containing the dungeon in which Mildred Dale was imprisoned.

"What is that in the corner—the thing of lever and wheels?" Friar Tuck demanded.

"Some infernal piece of machinery, no doubt, and we will keep our fingers off it," Little John replied. "Hist! there is a door, and perchance someone may be on the other side of it."

He tapped gently, but no answer was given; but Little John was patient, and knocked again.

"Mildred Dale," he said softly, putting his mouth to the keyhole.

"Who calls?" demanded a soft, sweet voice.

"Friends!" Little John replied.

"Thank Heaven for that!" Mildred exclaimed fervently. "But what friends? This place is so full of base deceptions that I can trust no one."

"Believe me when I say that we are friends indeed," Little John said. "We are the followers of Robin Hood. Your father, mother, and brothers are safe in Sherwood Forest, and we have come to save you."

These words sounded to the girl's ears too good to be true.

"To save me!" she cried, in an ecstasy of delight. "Shall I ever see the beautiful sunlight again?"

"Yes, if you will mind what we say," Little John replied. "Good Friar Tuck is here with me, and we will set about finding a way to release you. Keep quiet and leave the rest to us. I have keys with me, and one may fit the lock."

Little John had never doubted it. Glancing at the lock, he selected a key from the bunch, and in another moment the door swung open.

Silent, but with a joy that had its eloquence in her eyes, Mildred ran into the giant's arms. He lifted her and kissed her, as though she were a mere child, and then setting her on her feet again said:

"Now listen! We are going out of this castle, but may meet with dangers. But say no word, and show no fear. Friar Tuck will take care of you, and if there is any fighting to be done, it will fall to my share."

Along the passage they hastened, Little John loosening the axe in his belt and swinging the iron bar in his hand.

They reached the further end, and the giant felt for the spring, and after a time found it. He leaped out, as it were, to greet the sunlight, which was now flooding the landscape, and as he did so three men-at-arms passed.

They had scarcely time to lay hands on their swords when they were writhing on the ground, beaten down and stricken dumb with agony by the iron bar.

"To the moat! Quick!" the giant said. "The hornets will be buzzing about our ears soon."

Friar Tuck now came out in his true colours. Tossing his staff to Little John, he raised Mildred in his arms and, swinging her round on his shoulders, bade her cling to his neck. Then running to the moat he plunged in and swam for dear life.

Little John followed, now with his axe ready, and tumbled into the water.

"Give me the girl, friar," he said, "or you will stay to feed the fish."

"No, no; I can manage very well," Friar Tuck replied. "You will have enough to do without being encumbered by a burden."

The alarm-bell was now ringing. The portcullis flew up with a crash; the drawbridge was lowered, and men poured from the castle.

"We are lost," Friar Tuck groaned.

"Not yet," Little John replied. "There is help beyond the outer walls. Swim on."

The giant in his haste seized Friar Tuck by the neck and hurried him to the other side of the moat. The friar and Mildred scrambled out, but there was no time even to take breath.

Arrows and bolts were flying; hoarse shouts rent the air, and two men armed with lances galloped across the drawbridge.

Then came a change over the scene.

The horses reared, the men, stricken with arrows, reeled and dropped their lances.

"By St. Giles, Robin Hood is here!" Little John thundered. "Saved! saved! Look to the girl, good friar; and if I render not a good account of myself, brand me as a coward!"

Climbing up the bank, and leaping on the outer wall, he stood like a lion at bay. Bolts and arrows hissed round, but he paid no more attention to them than though they were harmless flies. His eyes were riveted on the spot where Robin Hood and his men were darting hither and thither, bowling over the baron's men in quick succession.

Lending a hand to Friar Tuck and Mildred, he pointed to a cluster of trees, and they, leaping from the wall, lost no time in taking shelter.

Robin Hood was now advancing boldly, with eight-and-forty good men at his back. Not an arrow did they waste. Every time a bowstring twanged a Norman went down.

The baron's retainers now gave up all hope of capturing Little John, but sought to bring him down; but the giant seemed to bear a charmed life, and walking coolly away joined the ranks of the King of Sherwood Forest.

"I give you thanks, John," Robin Hood said, gripping his hand. "We have been most anxious about you and the friar."

"See, yonder he comes through the trees with the girl," Little John replied. "But I must be busy. Where is my bow? I left it with Will Scarlet, and if any harm has come to it I'll ne'er forgive him."

"Here is your bow, and your quiver of arrows, too," Will Scarlet said, leaping forward. "But you must wait for a better chance to use them. See, the

cowards are raising the drawbridge. They run—they run!"

"Another flight of arrows, good men of Sherwood!" Robin Hood shouted. "There is yet time."

Full forty arrows flew as from one bow, and loud yells proclaimed the execution they had done.

Then the drawbridge rose over the great gate, the portcullis came grating down, as if gnashing its steel teeth with rage, and Baron Lachette, protected by his shield-bearer, appeared on the top of the keep.

Rage and dismay filled his heart. He had been befooled, deceived, and outwitted by the very men he had hoped would render him help.

Mildred Dale was gone, too, and Robin Hood, with a mere handful of men, stood boldly in front of his castle, defying him, hurling derisive epithets at him, and bidding him don his armour, mount his war-horse, and come out to fight.

Striking with his sword at those who stood near him, the baron shook his fist at the men of Sherwood Forest, and turned away, white with rage and sick at heart.

"Keep the alarm-bell ringing," he said, "and let no foot's space behind the walls be vacant, or we shall have these rogues in Lincoln green in the castle and hanging us over the towers."

CHAPTER 7

The Capture of Robin Hood and Little John.

AFTER greeting Mildred Dale and assuring her of his protection, Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck sat in council.

The King of Sherwood Forest, having ascertained from his faithful followers how Heanor Castle was fortified and the strength of the garrison, concluded that it would be madness to attempt to pierce those solid walls with such a small force as he had at his command.

The mission he had started on had, thanks to the giant and friar, been successfully carried out, but Robin Hood was not contented. Punishment should follow the crime, and, if not now, later

on, the baron should be brought to book and suffer.

After much deliberation Robin Hood decided to retire to Sherwood Forest and then advance upon the castle with his entire band. But he was not the man to do anything in a hurry. He merely fell back into the woods, posting scouts in good positions to warn him against a surprise, sent Mildred Dale back under an escort, and arranged his camp for the night.

The foresters spread themselves out so as to form a large circle, Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck occupying the centre, and after a good meal all except the scouts lay down to sleep for a few hours.

Before the last fire was extinguished the word was passed that a move homeward to Sherwood Forest was to be made at dawn.

Hours passed. The air was so still that scarce a leaf quivered, and the only sounds heard by the watchful scouts were such as they had grown long accustomed to.

But there was danger ahead. The wolf never comes boldly to the fold. He slinks round and round until making certain of his prey.

Out from Heanor Castle crept men, one by one. Each wore a long cloak over his armour, and the sheath of every sword was swathed in cloth so as to prevent it from jangling against its wearer's mail-clad limbs. Into the night they stole like shadows, keeping apart, uttering no sound.

This procession of silent men stole on until quite a hundred had passed out of the castle, and then the great gate swung slowly back, and the drawbridge rose almost inch by inch with hardly a creak in its machinery.

Baron Lachette was the last to leave. He had no relish for the task he had in hand, but he felt that his presence was necessary. He was a tyrant, but his men would obey when he was near. Without him they might take fright at the least alarm and come scuttling back with Robin Hood's bowmen hot on their heels.

Presently the man who was to act as guide appeared. Earlier in the day he

had left the castle by a secret way to find out whether the foresters yet remained in the neighbourhood. He had hung about the borders of the wood, and when evening came crept in unseen by Robin's vigilant scouts.

This man had done his spying with his life in his hands, but the promised reward was worth the risk; and, dreaming of riches, he led Baron Lachette to where the foresters were encamped.

One side of the wood was much denser than the other. Here there were immense covers of tangled growth, where the game found refuge from the swift-flying bolt. Through this maze of bush, brier, furze, and stunted trees ran a narrow path, hidden at each end by a belt of trees planted purposely to conceal it from view. This path had not been trodden for months, and the grass was knee-high, and yielded like a quagmire as the baron's men passed along.

Suddenly the guide held up his hand, and then went on alone.

Lachette scarcely breathed, and his men, stretching out in one long line, stood like statues.

Presently the baron started and caught at his breath as something touched him on the shoulder.

The guide had returned, and stood so close to him that he could feel the man's hot breath on his cheek.

"All is well," the guide said. "There is not a scout within fifty yards. You must attack suddenly and boldly. The darkness will help you, for the foresters cannot see to use their bows; but they are terrible enemies at close quarters. Victory is with him who strikes first."

"Yes, yes," Baron Lachette whispered back nervously. "Bid the men come forward, and we will rush upon the rebels."

"But the reward, baron — the promised reward?"

"My chief steward will see to that. The money is already counted out."

The guide began to grumble under his breath.

"It was arranged that you would bring it," he said. "Such work as this must be paid for promptly. If caught, I shall be hanged."

"A murrain seize you!" Baron

Lachette hissed. "Think you that I will break my word?"

"I have lived long enough not to put faith in the promises of even a Norman nobleman," the guide replied insolently. "Well, let it be as you wish. I will remain at your side until the end. If you deceive me, I will find a way to revenge."

So saying he slipped away and passed the word to the men, who, unsheathing their swords, drew nearer and waited for the word of command.

At last it came.

With a shout and clatter of arms the Normans fell on the foresters, who, staggering wildly from their sleep, hit out right and left.

For once they were caught in a trap.

Little John was the first to fall, and in a moment was struggling with half a dozen men, but the giant's strength availed him nothing then. Bewildered at the onslaught, and fighting like a mad bull, he felt ropes tightening round his limbs, and finally lay still—panting, overcome, but defiant.

A doleful snapping sound came to his ears, and he knew that the Normans were breaking up the foresters' bows. Then someone cried out that Robin Hood was captured, and after that there came a terrible discord of sounds—oaths, the cries of wounded men, the clash of steel, and bitter vows of vengeance as brave men bit the dust.

But soon these sounds died away.

The foresters had been driven back and the Normans were victorious.

Little John gnashed his teeth and strained at his bonds in impotent rage.

Every man that passed struck, kicked, and insulted him; but the giant felt no pain. He forgot all about himself and thought of Robin Hood. Was he dead? Had they cruelly murdered him, as every Norman had promised to do? If so, farewell for ever to Sherwood Forest and the gallant fight for liberty and justice.

Presently a torch flared up, others were lit, and Baron Lachette, with one arm hanging limp and useless at his side, towered over the giant.

"Bring him along," he said fiercely. "Drag the bulky rogue over the ground

and show him no mercy! We'll hang him cheek by jowl with Robin Hood. So perish all outlaws and traitors."

"Outlaw I am, and proud to call myself so," Little John retorted. "Take back the word traitor to your gorge, villain, and there let it bide till it chokes you! Bid your hirelings do their worst. As for myself, I care nothing, and would suffer a thousand deaths for Robin Hood's sake. Alas! that he should fall into such dastardly hands as yours!"

The baron cruelly set his foot upon Little John's mouth to stay the bitter words. Then the noose of a long rope was passed under his armpits, and a dozen men set to work tugging their burden through brake and brier; but although scratched, torn, and bruised, not a moan came from the giant's lips.

Within half a mile was a hut, used during the winter months by some charcoal burners, and thither they dragged him in triumph. So brutally had they used him that they did not expect to find him alive; but Little John was made of tough metal, and when set on his feet he stood breathing defiance at his captors.

Robin Hood had already arrived, and sat with his arms bound behind his back and his legs roped to a great log.

The face of the King of Sherwood Forest was bleeding in several places, but no attempt was made to stanch the blood or ease his pain.

"Courage, Little John," he cried out cheerily. "If we must die, we shall not die in vain. Other men will take our places and give back to these Normans more than they receive."

"I doubt it not, so far as myself is concerned," Little John replied. "But where is the man fit to stand in your shoes? Oh, Heaven! give me my liberty but for one moment, that I may crush that monster called a baron in these arms of my own!"

Baron Lachette strode up and struck the giant in the face.

"I had it in my mind," he said, "to hang you at once and put you out of your misery. But such a fate is too good for both of you. We will see whether torture can tame your spirits."

"Coward of a Norman, and worthy son of the rascal whose name you bear!" Robin Hood cried; "no torture your fiendish brain can invent will strike a pang of terror to my heart. Full twenty of your men lie dead, and had there been light not one would have escaped. Thank your master, the Evil One, for your good luck, and trouble us no more with the sound of your voice."

How many of the foresters had been killed Robin Hood could not say; but that they had suffered severely he was certain. And Friar Tuck, the man with the heart of a woman and a warrior combined—was he numbered with the dead?

Neither Robin Hood nor Little John had seen him during the fatal scrimmage, and there was only too much reason to fear that the jolly monk's voice was silent for ever.

The greater part of the baron's surviving men were sent out to bury the dead and attend to the wounded.

Of foresters they found but three lifeless bodies, and they believed that the living had dragged the other dead and wounded away.

During their absence Baron Lachette questioned Robin Hood and Little John as to the life they led in Sherwood Forest, and the number of followers at the outlaw's command.

For answers he received nothing but sneering gibes, which so maddened him that more than once he was on the point of thrusting his sword into their bodies. But he restrained himself from taking so short a way to his revenge. The dungeons of Heanor Castle contained instruments so appalling that men shuddered when they thought of the terrible uses they were put to.

"Bring those dogs some water," he said, "or they will die of thirst. Bind up their wounds, too, but I trow they will soon wish that they had died at the point of the sword."

It wanted yet an hour to dawn, and the baron sat down to gloat over his victims. Wine and food were brought, and he shared it with a favoured few, while the rest, wondering when a move would be made towards Heanor Castle, wandered round and round the hut.

Puffed up with conceit, they fondly believed that the foresters had fled for their lives back to Sherwood Forest, but little did they know the men they had to deal with.

The bravest of armies meet with reverses, and the god of battles is not always on the side of valour.

Baron Lachette resolved upon waiting until daylight. He had a broken arm that required attention, and he, more wary than most of his men, feared an ambush.

Robin Hood's followers might be still hovering near, he told himself, and only waiting for an opportunity to turn the tables upon him.

The sun had scarcely risen when a noise outside brought him to his feet.

Something had happened. Then came a clatter of arms, the pawing of horses' hoofs, and presently a man came with important news.

Earl De La Haye and his retinue had arrived at Heanor Castle with a message from Prince John.

This was good news, but it chafed Baron Lachette. It behoved him to return at once to the castle, but under the circumstances he deemed it best not to take the prisoners back with him until he had received De La Haye and digested the proud prince's message.

"I will send an esquire when I require these rebels to be brought to the castle," he said. "And I will despatch reinforcements with provisions. See that these men do not escape. Watch them well and closely, or the fate I have reserved for them shall be yours."

Then the baron departed for Heanor Castle.

The day passed, but no message arrived for the removal of the prisoners, who were kept apart, and so hemmed in that they could scarcely breathe.

But neither Robin Hood nor Little John expected to escape unaided. To even dream of it was sheer madness. Would aid come?

Robin Hood could hardly hope for it, but he never lost heart, and, weary in mind and body, he lay down and forgot his troubles in sleep.

Little John did the same. There was

nothing more to say, nothing more to be done, but to wait and hope for the best.

At dusk the baron's decision was made known, but it was not what had been expected. Something in the prince's message had displeased him, and he commanded that the prisoners should still remain closely guarded in the wood.

The captain of the band then took upon himself to remove Robin Hood and Little John from the hut, and he ordered them to be bound to trees.

"Shelter is for honest men at night; anywhere is good enough for rebel hogs," he remarked brutally.

All day long a storm had been brewing, and when the sun went down the sullen, copper-hued clouds, charged with electricity, condensed and became darker and darker. Now and then lightning darted amid the trees, and thunder muttered among the distant hills, rolling angrily from peak to peak. But no rain fell until the storm burst with fearful suddenness.

The air turned blue, then fiery red, and every object was as clearly visible as if shown by the light streaming from a furnace door. Then came a crash, as though the very heavens had fallen, and following the terrible sound the rain came down in one vast sheet.

It drove the Normans before it, as they had been driven by Robin Hood's bowmen.

Streams became rivers, purling rivulets became roaring torrents, and in a few minutes the earth was covered ankle-deep.

Meanwhile, drenched to the skin and bound to trees, over which the lightning played like fiery whips, the hapless prisoners thought their last hour had come.

The hut took fire, and as the rain hissed upon the flames and seemed to feed them like oil the Normans ran out, crying that the day of judgment was at hand.

They gave little thought to the prisoners, for indeed the earth seemed doomed to destruction.

Flash succeeded flash, and crash succeeded crash. Then came the wind,

tearing through the trees and filling the land with dreadful sounds. And all the while the rain came down as if it meant raining for ever.

But at last there came a lull in the tempest, and some of the Normans crept back. The prisoners had not moved. There they stood, bound and helpless, and with their heads hanging forward with the agony of pain and exposure.

So far so good. The captain of the men ordered them to set about extinguishing the still burning hut, and to chop down boughs to construct a covering where the roof had fallen in.

As they were working, and Robin Hood was beginning to pray that the hand of death might touch him kindly and ease him of his pain, a voice whispered in his ear:

"Courage! Stand still! I will cut the cords that bind you, and leave a trusty sword near to your hand."

It was the voice of Friar Tuck, and it thrilled every nerve in Robin's body and gave him new life. His heart bounded with joy, but he dared not speak as he felt the cruel, biting cords part from his limbs.

Then a flask of wine came round to his lips and he emptied it.

Never had he tasted anything so delicious as that drink. It was nectar for the gods, and acted like a charm. He wanted to leap forward and dash into the midst of the Normans; but he pressed himself back against the tree and waited for some sign from Little John.

Up to that moment Robin had not seen Friar Tuck, but it was enough to know that he was near. He turned his eyes towards where Little John was bound, and saw him give a sudden movement.

Then the giant lowered his right hand, and the next moment there gleamed the blade of a double-edged sword.

The Normans worked on, beating out the still smouldering fire, when like a second tempest there burst on them a body of men with swords and clubs.

They saw the terrible form of the giant towering over them like an aveng-

ing Colossus; they marked how at every sweep of his sword a man fell to rise no more; and when Robin Hood, his face still smeared with blood and his voice hoarse with passion, shouted "Down with the Normans! Sweet liberty or death!" they turned and fled, as though a legion of demons had been let loose among them.

An hour later Robin Hood learned how Will Scarlet, seeing him hurled to the earth and made captive, had wisely withdrawn then and waited his chance; and how Friar Tuck had volunteered to travel through the storm, trusting to the confusion it would cause to liberate his beloved chief and Little John.

CHAPTER 8.

The Dungeon with the Moving Walls.

THE earth lay cold and white.

The summer had passed away all too soon like a beautiful dream, and nature was captive in the icy grip of winter.

For days and days snow had fallen at intervals, until landmarks were blotted out and homesteads were mere heaps of fleecy white.

There was silence in Sherwood Forest, the silence of solitude and desolation.

The bare trees bent beneath their loads of snow, no birds sang, and no evidence of life was visible, save the tracks of rabbit, hare, and marten.

The deer had gone to their winter quarters far into the depths of the forest, where, it was said, no man had trod since the world began.

Farming operations were at a standstill, and only the boldest and hardiest of men ventured to travel a distance to the markets.

The people had not forgotten to pile up huge stacks of wood and lay in stocks of provisions, and for the most part they spent the days in repairing their households, in mending their bows and other weapons, and getting ready for the next springtide.

Robin Hood's favourite tree was like the rest, gaunt and bare. The snow lay thick beneath it, and no longer were heard the jests and songs of the bold foresters.

Late in the autumn, Oswald de Burgh, Sheriff of Nottingham, and a tyrant to boot, had scoured the forest at the head of two hundred men in search of the outlaws.

There was scarce a hollow tree that was not examined for tell-tale marks, since it was said that Robin Hood had taught his followers to blaze a kind of cipher on the bark of the trees with their axes.

Glades and dells were hunted through time and again. Caverns were searched for and examined, but not a sign of the freebooter or his merry men was discovered.

So when the icy wind whistled through the forest, and black, nipping frost came with heavy snowstorms, the chase was abandoned, and people said that nothing more would be heard of Robin Hood that year.

It wanted a fortnight to Christmas, and there was much bustle and activity in the good town of Derby. The monks came forth from the monasteries to sell the work on which they had toiled for nearly a year. Rich carving, beautiful cloth, and delicately-fashioned crucifixes and images had they to tempt the vanity of the worldly and stir the hearts of the religious.

The severity of the weather had now abated a little. The nights were still bitterly cold and frosty, but the sky was clear, and there was a prospect of doing business.

Baron Lachette had granted the majority of his men a holiday that they might spend their wages and indulge in a little revelry before setting to work in earnest in preparing the castle for the Christmas festivities.

The principal streets were filled with them. Varlets and scullions rubbed shoulders with esquires and captains of the horse. They laughed, danced, sang, drank, and made merry, for there were many there whose feet did not often take them beyond the castle walls.

Monks and priests mingled with the crowds. Throngs gathered round the stalls, and money changed hands quickly.

"A silver penny for this bow taken from Robin Hood!" cried a salesman of

curiosities, holding it up. "I will throw ten arrows in, but I cannot vouch for them, although I am almost ready to swear that they are the very ones shot by that arch-rebel, Little John."

"That is the fiftieth Robin Hood bow you have sold to-day," said a bystander, laughing; "but, nathless, I'll take it, although it has no more seen Sherwood Forest than you have seen the whale that swallowed Jonah."

"How can you be so sure about that, friend?" demanded a voice.

The speaker was a poorly-dressed yeoman, and the snow had not yet driven the summer tan from his face.

"Why, see here," replied the purchaser, "this bow is of lancewood, and badly seasoned, too, while the bows of Sherwood Forest are of yew."

"You seem to be well informed," the other replied.

"I ought to be," responded the purchaser of the bow. "Was I not born in Sherwood Forest, and did I not live there until a year ago last Martinmas?"

"Then you know Robin Hood by sight!"

"Much better than I know you by name, for that I am ignorant of."

The questioner was no other than Baron Lachette, and touching the man on the shoulder he drew him aside.

"You have an honest look," he said. "How are you called?"

"Will Redman. Ay, I am honest until I starve, then I think it no sin to take a loaf to satisfy my hunger."

"Be patient, and perchance you may be able to earn your cap full of gold. If you were born in the forest you must know it well."

"There is not a glade, dell, or cave that is strange to me," Redman replied. "But it is a sorry place at this time of the year, and I am well out of it."

"You do not seem to understand me," said the baron. "It is said that Robin Hood has some vast place for himself and men which none can discover."

"That is because Robin Hood keeps his secret well—or thinks so."

"Thinks so! Know you of it?"

"That is a ticklish question for a

stranger to ask me," Will Redman replied. "There are other ears than yours and mine here."

"I am Baron Lachette, lord of Heanor Castle, and it is the dearest object of my life to capture Robin Hood and kill him. Think, friend—a cap full of gold."

"I'll not talk here," Will Redman responded resolutely. "You may mean what you say, or you may be setting a trap to catch me. No, no! It will not do. The weasel is wary, but the hare sleeps with his eyes open and his ears pricked."

"Take this purse as an earnest. It contains twenty nobles. Come to my castle at sundown, and there I will talk with you. Here are the words which will pass you in. When challenged at the lodge at the foot of the drawbridge, say, 'It will thaw to-night.' You will come alone."

Will Redman nodded his head and grinned his thanks as he dropped the wallet into his pocket.

"I must not tarry here," he said. "The likes of me do not hold converse with barons, and there may be thieves whose fingers itch to get at the purse. I go to place it in safety. Expect me an hour after sundown."

"I said at sundown."

"I'd rather come when night has fallen," Will Redman said. "I care not to run the risk of being followed. There is no moon, and I'll pray that the sky may be cloudy."

Baron Lachette took a long look at Will Redman before parting company with him, and then, calling one of his stewards, named Siward, to him, said:

"Give orders that he who presents himself and says, 'It will thaw to-night,' has entrance to the castle and is treated well until I send for him."

"My lord," Siward replied. "I am but your humble servant, and it is no business of mine to quibble about a command from your gracious lips, but have a care before you admit a stranger to your castle."

"Pshaw! I will be well prepared," Baron Lachette said. "You are thinking of Robin Hood, and, by Pluto! so am I. He played me a scurvy trick, and

came near paying the penalty. Next time there shall be no mistake. As soon as the weather breaks I will drive him from his haunts, and his head shall blacken on a pole outside my castle."

Siward said no more. He had feathered his nest, as the saying goes, and did not care whether the baron lived or died, so long as he himself got off scot-free.

The day wore on, and the retainers waxed merrier and merrier. They filled the rooms of the inns, and danced outside the doors, stopping only for breath and to drink.

Their antics were watched with amusement by the people of Derby town and a number of strangers who had come to sell and buy, and by not a few vagrants, who, with outstretched grimy hands, whined continuously for charity.

The baron's retainers were liberal, for it was not often that they had a chance of being generous. Money in the castle was of no use to them, and they might as well get rid of it before returning to the monotonous life they led in and round about the grim walls.

An hour before sundown the hilarity had reached its height, and then came the signal by sound of trumpet for the men to return.

The sun sank behind a bank of heavy clouds, and soon snow began to fall.

At first a few flakes danced in the air as if reluctant to reach the earth, but soon the wind rose, and a storm, threatening to last the night, set in.

The streets emptied quickly. The monks disappeared, merchants shut up their shops, and the hucksters, packing up their goods, crowded into the inns to rest their weary limbs and count their gains over the roaring log-fires.

The strangers who had come to the town were no longer to be seen. Warned, so it seemed, by the impending storm, they had made haste to return to their homes.

Just one hour after sunset Will Redman set out for Heanor Castle. He was a strong-limbed man, and needed to be so to combat against such weather. The wind drove resolutely at him, as though determined to carry him off his legs, and

the snow, forcing blinding wreaths round him, lashed and stung his face. But in spite of all difficulties he held on, and struggled along the path leading to the square stone lodge at the foot of the drawbridge.

An iron chain, attached to a great bell, swung slowly in the wind. Will Redman tugged at it, and ere the bell had ceased ringing the light of a flaring torch fell upon his face and a pair of black eyes glared into his through the thickly barred gates.

"How now?" growled the lodge-keeper. "What want you?"

"It will thaw to-night," responded Will Redman.

The iron gate swung open, but no sooner had Redman passed through than two men-at-arms pounced on him and twisted his arms behind his back.

"By the rood," Will Redman said calmly, "this is not the treatment I expected. Take me to your lord and master, and I'll warrant that he will treat me with better civility."

"We have orders to search you before you are admitted to the castle," said the torch-bearer.

"Willingly," Redman replied. "Faith, the baron gave me a purse of twenty nobles, and glad I am that I left it at my lodging, or perchance I might return without it."

The men found nothing save a dagger in an old leather sheath which they took from him.

Then one of the henchmen put a whistle to his lips and blew it shrilly. The sound was answered by three strokes of a bell, and then a dark, shapeless mass began moving through the snow. It was the drawbridge coming down, and as it spanned the moat the portcullis rose.

"This way," said he who had appeared at the gate. "I will take you at once to the baron. He awaits your coming with some impatience."

At that moment a sudden gust of wind extinguished the torch.

"Wait here," the man said. "Move not until I get a light, lest you fall into the frozen moat."

"I'll go with you," Will Redman answered. "This awful darkness

affrights me. By Our Lady, I wish I had not come."

"Coward and dolt, do as I tell you," the retainer growled. "I'll be back again before you can count a hundred on your fingers."

As he was returning there came to his ears a sound that he could not understand. It mingled with the wind in a strange manner, and he was peering through the darkness when there came such a crashing and a splintering as to make him recoil in terror. The lodge gates were open, and the great lock, hanging by battered and split screws, was rendered useless.

Then a giant with an axe, and followed by a crowd of forms, came dashing through.

The retainer leaped from the bridge, but ere he reached the frozen surface of the moat a wedge was driven into the ledge that supported the drawbridge, and held it fast.

The men working the portcullis heard the sound, and thinking that the drawbridge had fallen, rushed out, and then tore madly back again, thinking of nothing but saving their lives.

For arrows were now flying through the snow, and the giant with the axe was beating down all before him.

The blood of three of the baron's retainers reddened the snow, and the rest fled, shrieking that the Evil One and his army of demons had come.

The giant, Little John, stepped aside to let Robin Hood pass, and his followers, clad in all sorts of costumes, but all well armed, rushed after him. It seemed they would never end.

On they came, shouting, cheering, and threatening.

Retribution had come at last.

In ten minutes the castle was in their hands, and the half-drunken soldiers scurried away like rats. Some took to the moat, but the ice broke, and out of the darkness came the frenzied cries of drowning men.

Sentinels deserted their posts, and at the name of Robin Hood scores threw down their weapons and crept into dark places, where by chance they might be overlooked.

Doors were banged and secured, but

neither locks nor bolts availed against the strokes of Little John's axe.

The baron was in the banqueting-hall with a few picked men when a steward rushed in, shrieking:

"Save yourself! You have been betrayed! Robin Hood has taken the castle, and your men fly like chaff before him!"

Baron Lachette turned white to the lips, and without waiting to call upon the others to follow him he dragged a huge piece of tapestry aside and disappeared.

And then as if by magic the great hall, often the scene of revelry and drunkenness, was filled with men, with one clad in Lincoln green at their head.

"Where is the baron?" Robin Hood demanded.

The steward fell on his knees and whined for mercy.

"Pshaw! I require not so poor a life," Robin Hood said. "My business is with the base Norman noble. Where is he?"

"Fore Heaven I know not," the steward replied.

Robin Hood took the man by the throat and shook him until his teeth chattered in his head.

"Answer truthfully, or by the memory of my father, foully murdered by a Norman tyrant, I'll choke the words from your craven lips! How long is it since the baron was here?"

"He passed through yonder," the steward gurgled, pointing to the tapestry.

"Enough," said Robin Hood. "He may as well surrender and pay the penalty of his crimes. Even if he escapes from the castle, a score of my sharpshooters will find sport in bringing him down. Ho! there, Little John! Take you such men as you may need, and place them in the passages. You, Will Scarlet, come with me."

Will Scarlet, the man who, under the name of Redman, had so neatly tricked the baron and thus gained entrance to the castle for the foresters, laughed as he stepped forward.

"A dozen more men will I take with me," cried Robin Hood. "The baron must die; but I shall not be satisfied

unless I look upon him alive! Forward!"

"I will lead the way," Friar Tuck said. "Methinks I know where the baron has hidden himself; if I mistake not, we shall find him in the dungeon to which he carried Mildred Dale. And," added the friar, with a twinkle in his eye, "I had time to plant two men at a certain place that leads to the outer walls."

"You have done well," Robin Hood replied. "Best of friends, guide me to where this villain skulks."

Friar Tuck had not been at fault in his judgment. Baron Lachette had rushed headlong down the corridor he and Quasamodo had traversed, and, once in the secret passage, made for the dungeon.

He had a master-key of it and others, and once in, thought himself safe. But that thought soon fled with his hopes.

Soon there came a low murmur of voices and the steady tramping of feet.

The corridor was full of men. The baron's heart stood still. Would they pass the dungeon? Would they notice that evil piece of machinery in the corner? And if so, would they try to find out what it was intended for?

Robin Hood and his men were near. They stopped at the dungeon door.

"Baron Lachette," cried the outlaw, "your time has come! Surrender to me, the avenger of wrongs."

The baron made no reply. His tongue filled his mouth, his heart sickened, and a great wave of dread passed over him.

A deep and awful groan came from his lips. It was sufficient to prove that he was there.

"Find Little John, and bid him bring his axe," Robin Hood said. "We'll have the door down in a trice."

Friar Tuck pointed to the lever.

"Little John has the key of the door, but perhaps that will open it."

Had he known what was about to happen, the words would never have been uttered.

Robin Hood seized the lever with both hands and pressed it downwards.

And then the tremor of an earthquake seemed to pass through the vast building.

"The walls move," Friar Tuck cried, aghast. "Heaven save us, the castle is falling!"

Baron Lachette uttered a fearful shriek, and crying out that he would surrender, ran to the door.

Too late!

The fiendish machinery once fairly set moving could not be stopped. There was no hitch now. The walls closed on him, crushing him like a spider under a wheel, and then the door burst open to show what had been done.

For the first time in his life Friar Tuck fainted, and Robin Hood, overcome with horror, fled from the scene.

Only a short time was spent in the castle by the outlaw and his men, but that time sufficed to bring wealth of great value to light. The news of what had been accomplished had scarcely passed through Derby town when Heanor Castle was deserted and in flames, and Robin Hood and his bold foresters were tramping through the snow on their way back to Sherwood Forest.

CHAPTER 9.

A Norman Knight Made Welcome.

LONG before dawn on Christmas morning one path at least was beaten in Sherwood Forest through the snow.

It was beaten by the feet of men and the hoofs of horses, for Robin Hood's invitations to his feast were numerous, and accepted joyfully by the foresters, their sweethearts, and wives.

Ned Carter and Dick Driver had undertaken the task of guiding them to one of those vast, mysterious caves which formed the outlaws' strongholds and defied the Normans to discover.

Preparations on a huge scale had been made for the feast. Never had there been such roasting of rounds of beef, haunches of venison, plump turkeys, and tender pheasants.

Friar Tuck presided over the eatables and drinkables, while Little John and a number of willing assistants brought in loads of logs and tidied up the cave.

What a dinner it was! Think of it, and picture it if you can, held in one of Nature's halls, resounding with laughter and good-fellowship.

After the feast the tables and benches were cleared away as if by magic, and nearly all fell to dancing; and so the revelry went on, until the short day began to wane.

Robin Hood feared no foe while Sherwood lay crushed in the icy hand of winter; but nevertheless he was careful to guard against sudden attack.

Sentry duty was not pleasant work on Christmas Day, but cheerfully enough it was undertaken by a number of men, who relieved each other every half-hour.

When it came to Little John's turn, Friar Tuck announced his intention of joining him.

So outside they went, and paced to and fro on the frozen ground.

"My little friend," said the friar, "it is well that I keep you company, for surely after such a meal as you have had, you must soon fall asleep."

"Look to yourself, friar," Little John growled. "It is not my custom to mark how much food a man can devour at one sitting; but, 'fore Heaven, I found it impossible to keep my eyes from you!"

"Being Christmas Day," the friar replied, "I do confess that I departed from my usual habit of fasting."

"Habit of fasting!" quoth Little John. "Hear him! Why, scarce a day passes but you eat as much as any three men in the band! What say you? Shall we walk a little way in the forest? The wind blows cold."

"As cold as Norman charity. Yes, let us walk," Friar Tuck said. "The snow is beautiful, but give me spring and summer, when the shadow of the sun-dial tarries almost into night."

"And bring work for us," Little John added. "Wintering here makes us but fat and idle. Yet here we must stay until March, without hoping to draw bow on anything but stag and deer."

"My faith!" said Friar Tuck, "it would be a relief if we could hope for a fight before we saw the colour of the grass again. St. Anthony! what's this?"

Footprints; but both the friar and Little John knew that they had not

been made by one of Robin Hood's guests.

"Here's game of some kind to hunt, at all events," Little John replied. "The footprints of no Saxon, either. See the broad toes, and——"

"Hush!" Friar Tuck whispered. "See you not that we cannot be far away from the stranger? Here are footprints hardly feathered with snow."

The words were scarcely out of Friar Tuck's mouth when a man dropped from a tree and began to run.

Christmas Day saved him. Had it been any other in the year his career would have come to a sharp ending at the point of a shaft, but Little John stayed his hand and merely shouted to the man to stop.

But the fugitive was in no mind to do so. Not far away his horse was tethered to a tree, and he made his way towards it as fast as his legs could carry him.

The friar's limbs were short and fat, but Little John had an enormous stride, and after the man he went, roaring terrible threats. These, added to fear, caused the man to fall into the snow, and in a moment he was on his knees.

"Pity, good sir," he said. "I meant no harm. A Norman I am, it is true."

"A Norman!" quoth Little John. "Ay, and not of poor quality, I trow. You are a belted knight."

"True again," said the stranger. "I am bound for Nottingham, and should have reached there this morning, but I lost my way, and now darkness has overtaken me."

"Something else has overtaken you, too," Little John replied grimly. "Your name?"

"Sir Charles Angerstein."

"I fear that Oswald de Burgh, sheriff of Nottingham, will miss one of his guests," Little John said. "You must come with me. Surrender your sword to Friar Tuck."

Sir Charles Angerstein started at the mention of the name.

"Is it possible," he said, "that I am near Robin Hood, the outlaw?"

"We call him King of Sherwood Forest," Little John replied. "Be advised by me, and call him by no other title when you are brought before him."

"I am lost!" the Norman cried.

He was a young man, scarcely two-and-twenty, and the honour of knight-hood had not been bestowed on him more than a year.

"You are certainly lost if it be proved that you are a spy," Little John replied.

"A spy! I? No! I swear by the rood I am not," Sir Charles replied.

"In that case," said Friar Tuck, who felt some pity for the young man, "you stand some chance of keeping your life. Bring him along, Little John, and keep him not in suspense."

"A Christmas present for your majesty," said the giant, marching the young knight up to where Robin Hood sat at Maid Marian's side watching the foresters as they danced to the strains of merry music.

"So," said Robin Hood, eyeing the Norman sternly, "even on the day of universal peace and good will I am not left undisturbed."

"My faith!" Sir Charles replied, "I would have left you to your feasting and dancing. I am in such a mood myself, and hoped to dance with one who——"

"I see," said Robin Hood. "There is another besides Oswald de Burgh who expects you at Nottingham Castle."

The young knight's face coloured, and when he spoke again his lips quivered.

"Truly," he said. "Yes, there is one other waiting for me, but I must try to forget."

"What! forget the lady who loves you?" Robin Hood said.

"You have found out my secret," Sir Charles said, blushing like a girl. "But why ask me these questions? At the best I am an unwelcome guest here, and I——"

"Yes; say on."

"I have heard tell that you show no mercy to your prisoners."

"The man who said that lied in his teeth," Robin Hood replied. "I show no mercy to tyrants, spies, the robbers of the poor, and dastardly insulters of women; but I know how to honour a foeman worthy of my steel. Sit you down; eat and drink. Then you shall go on your way. Ho, there! Wine and dainties for our guest."

"And this," Sir Charles Angerstein thought, "is the man who has been painted to me as a monster! Your pardon for misjudging you," he said aloud.

"Let it go! Think no more of it," Robin Hood said, snapping his fingers. "I am not in a mind to frown to-day. How goes the Crusade, know you?"

"There are no fresh tidings," Sir Charles replied. "I start in January to join King Richard."

"And will you take a message to him from me?"

"I will if I live to deliver it."

"Tell him," said Robin Hood, laughing, "that I hope the day is near at hand when he will sit at my table and eat of one of his own fat bucks."

"I will remember that."

When Sir Charles had eaten, Robin Hood rose and called to his men:

"Ho, there! Who is willing to see this gentleman to Nottingham?"

A dozen foresters sprang forward, and Robin Hood, selecting three, held out his hand to the young knight.

"Had you come for war you would have found me ready, even had you four hundred steel-clad men at your back; but since you came in peace, in peace depart. Farewell!"

* * * * *

When, in due time, Sir Charles Angerstein delivered Robin Hood's message to Richard, the Lion-hearted King threw back his head and laughed.

"He is a bold rogue," he cried. "I will take him at his word, if I am spared to return to England."

THE END.

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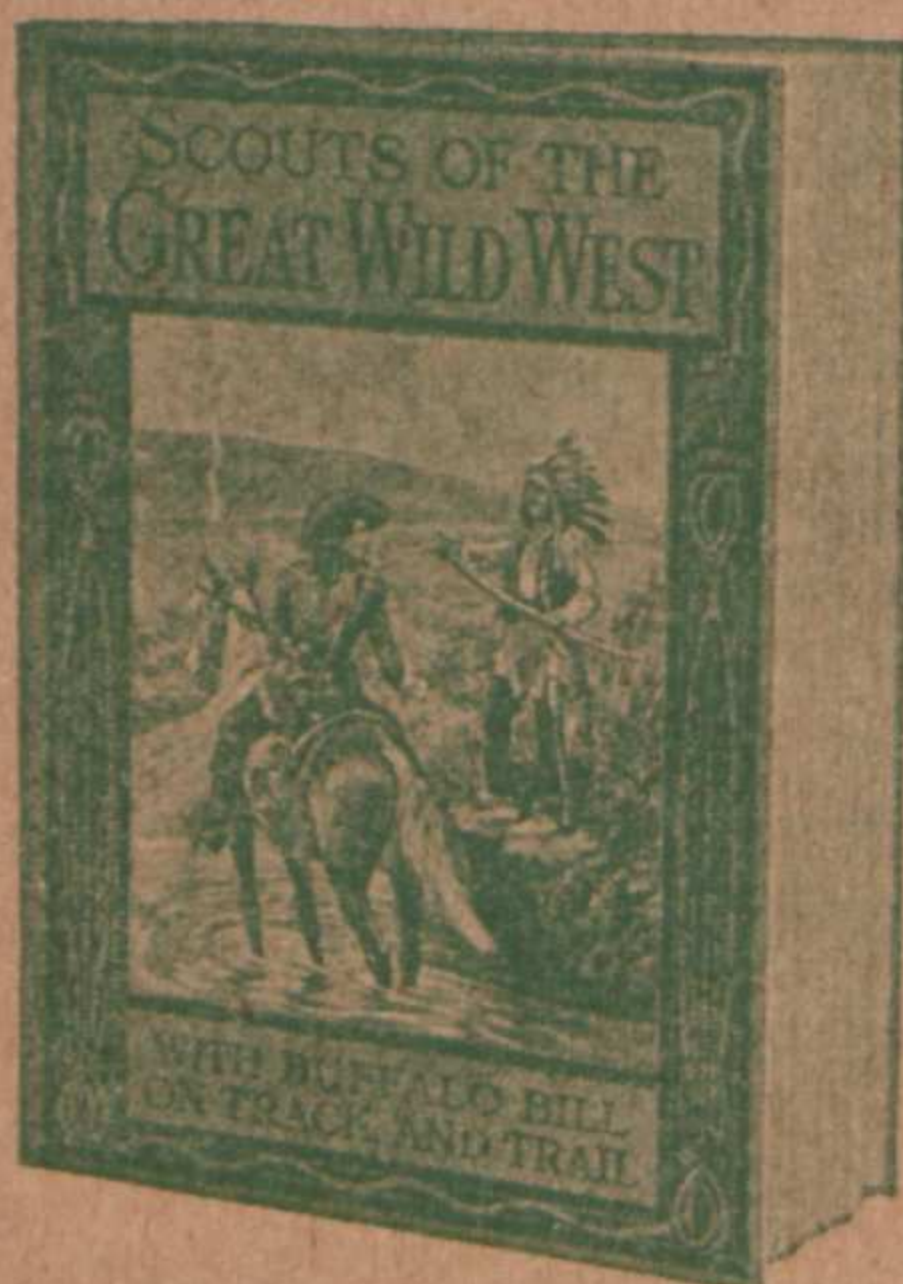
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